

ARTICLE APPEARED
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THE WASHINGTON TIMES
13 May 1983

Pay attention, now—This is a leak

Armed with hip-holstered revolvers, fingerprint dust, and lie detectors, the FBI is looking for the "person or persons unknown" who leaked a copy of the administration's April 1982 plans for fighting communism in Central America to *The New York Times*. Using the FBI on this one makes the fellow who used a shotgun to kill gnats look like a reasonable man.

It's the first time the FBI has been asked to find a leak in the Reagan administration. As our Jeremiah O'Leary reported yesterday, National Security Advisor William Clark put the G-men on the case after the memo was published in the newspaper's April 7, 1983 editions.

A White House official leaked to O'Leary confirmation that the published document is "authentic." The same official whispered his suspicion that the leaker hoped publication would force Ronald Reagan to back off from his commitment "to counter the spread of Marxism in this hemisphere." We've read the memo in *The New York Times*, and we're mystified by all the fuss.

If the leaker thought he was going to make Reagan back down, he obviously didn't know the stern stuff of which our president is made. For the most part, the document shows how serious is the communist threat in Latin America and that the administration is serious about fighting it. We're happy to inform Jerry O'Leary's source that that's not a secret.

Washington runs on leaks. One man's leak is another's trial balloon. We note that the newspaper published the memo only three weeks before the president's unequivocal April 28 speech to Congress on the need for increased American aid to El Salvador.

It occurs to us that whoever committed the leak may have wanted to lay a foundation for the El Salvador speech or, perhaps, test congressional and public reaction to the administration's determination to stop communist infiltration of the Americas.

We don't mean to belittle the problems leaks can cause. The government can't function if all of its business — especially national security business — is conducted

on the front page of every newspaper in the country. If the document had been published when it was written, in April 1982, the administration's plans for fighting southern hemisphere communism could have been seriously compromised. Public understanding of the problem was poor, and opponents of our Latin American policy could well have used the memo to advantage.

But that was in April 1982. When *The New York Times* finally printed the memo in April 1983, it was old news. The top-secret paper merely confirmed what everyone knew to be the Reagan administration's views. If the White House staff hoped its cries of outrage would call attention to the memo, it got its wish. If it thinks the leak threatened the security of the republic, it's wrong.

A word about lie detectors. They don't work. Last year the Pentagon said it would use the machines to investigate news leaks. This March the president told government agencies to write the devices into their regulations for the same reason. The FBI may use them to investigate the leak discussed above. But the acting assistant secretary of defense for health affairs has told Secretary of Defense Weinberger, "the polygraph misclassifies innocent people as liars" half the time. Flipping a coin would be just as accurate — and a lot faster and cheaper.

Standard questioning technique with the machines uses a long list of intimate personal questions to "establish a baseline" against which responses to the "real" questions can be measured. Even if the device were 100 percent accurate, subjecting tens or hundreds of people to such questioning in the hope of catching one miscreant is too Big Brother-ish, too violative of personal privacy.

Lie detectors have no place in a conservative administration that values the rights of individuals to be free from governmental intrusion into their personal lives. The president's directive should be rescinded, the machines junked.